

SEP 17 2004

# SEA LETTER

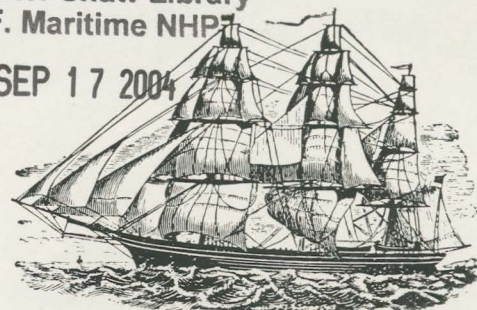
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## SHIP BALCLUTHA REPAIRS — A Second Restoration Effort Complete



San Francisco's Bethlehem Shipyard took *Balclutha* in hand last April and in seven weeks accomplished major repair work which places the ship another crucial step towards the goal of long-term preservation. This "second restoration" carried forward essential repairs which had been postponed for want of funds during the year-long restoration of 1954-1955.

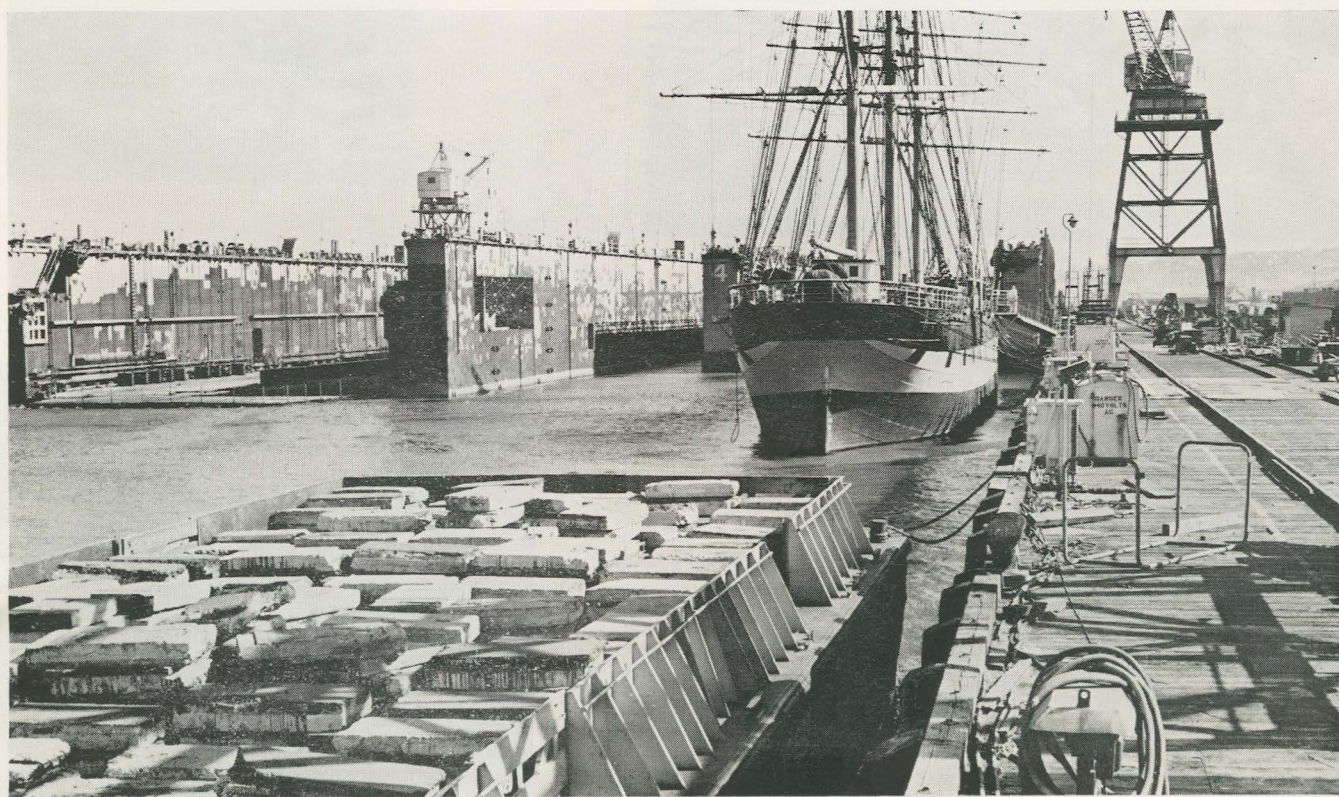
That first remarkable effort, six years ago, saw the rusting hulk *Pacific Queen* regain her old personality as the Cape Horner *Balclutha*, saw the ship drydocked, patched, sandblasted, and painted, her yards repaired or renewed, her perilous rigging replaced. It was an effort which strained the resources of our Association to the breaking point, and which succeeded only with the help of volunteer labor and donated supplies and services. It was an effort which achieved its ultimate success

when the ship proved that she could support herself.

*Balclutha* has not only supported herself during the ensuing five years, but she has supported the Maritime Museum as well, keeping its activities almost completely off the shoulders of the taxpayers of San Francisco. She has paid for the extensive promotion required to establish the San Francisco Maritime State Historical Monument — the Museum's *Project X*.

Finally, the old full-rigger was able to lay aside two-thirds of the bill for her own second hospitalization — a visit to Bethlehem Shipyard, where critical and overdue repairs could be carried out. Three major jobs were undertaken: removal of sand ballast and replacement with clean concrete, doubling of dangerously thin waterline plating, and repair of the weak foretopmast head.

NEW BALLAST FOR AN OLD SHIP . . . The primary purpose of *Balclutha's* visit to the shipyard this spring was to rid the vessel of 819 long tons of corrosive and dangerous sand ballast and replace it with the same weight of clean concrete slabs and blocks.







**SHOVELING THE OLD BALLAST OUT OF THE SHIP . . .**  
In 1933, when showman Frank Kissinger bought the ship from the Alaska Packers Association with a view to a world cruise, he added 600 tons of river sand to the 400 tons of sand and gravel ballast already in the ship. This was on the advice of Captain Charles Watts, who subsequently sailed the red, blue, and aluminum painted *Pacific Queen* as far as San Pedro for Kissinger. In the depths of the depression this was as far as the world cruise ever got. Here, 27 years later, workers at Bethlehem Shipyard are ridding the ship of all the old sand by shoveling it through holes cut in the bottom of the ship while the vessel is supported in drydock.

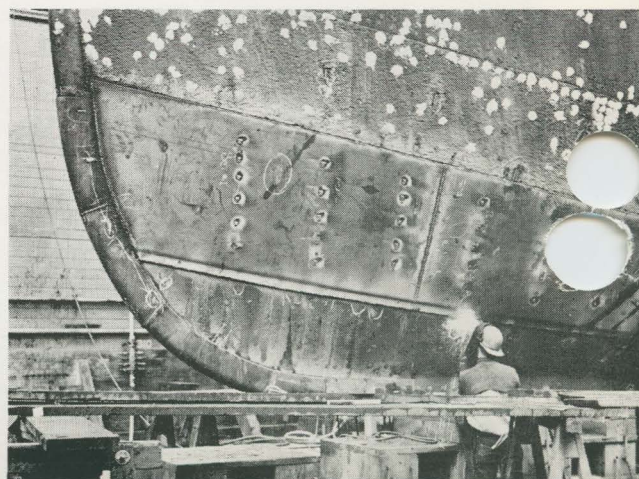
**PRYING LOOSE THE ROTTED CEILING PLANKS . . .** During a quarter century in the ship, the ballast had become increasingly damp from deck leaks and open hatches, and the moist sand in turn had rotted the planking supporting it and nurtured corrosion where it touched the steel members. The ship's keelson (the I-beam at the left) had to be replaced for 12 feet amidships and reinforced extensively right aft in the ship.



**THE FIRST SLING OF BALLAST BLOCKS . . .**  
Before the first concrete block came aboard the lower hold was sandblasted, treated with a rust inhibiting compound, and fitted with heavy timber cribs to contain the ballast. The floor of the cribs is nearly five feet above the outer skin of the ship, to provide access for future care of the hull.



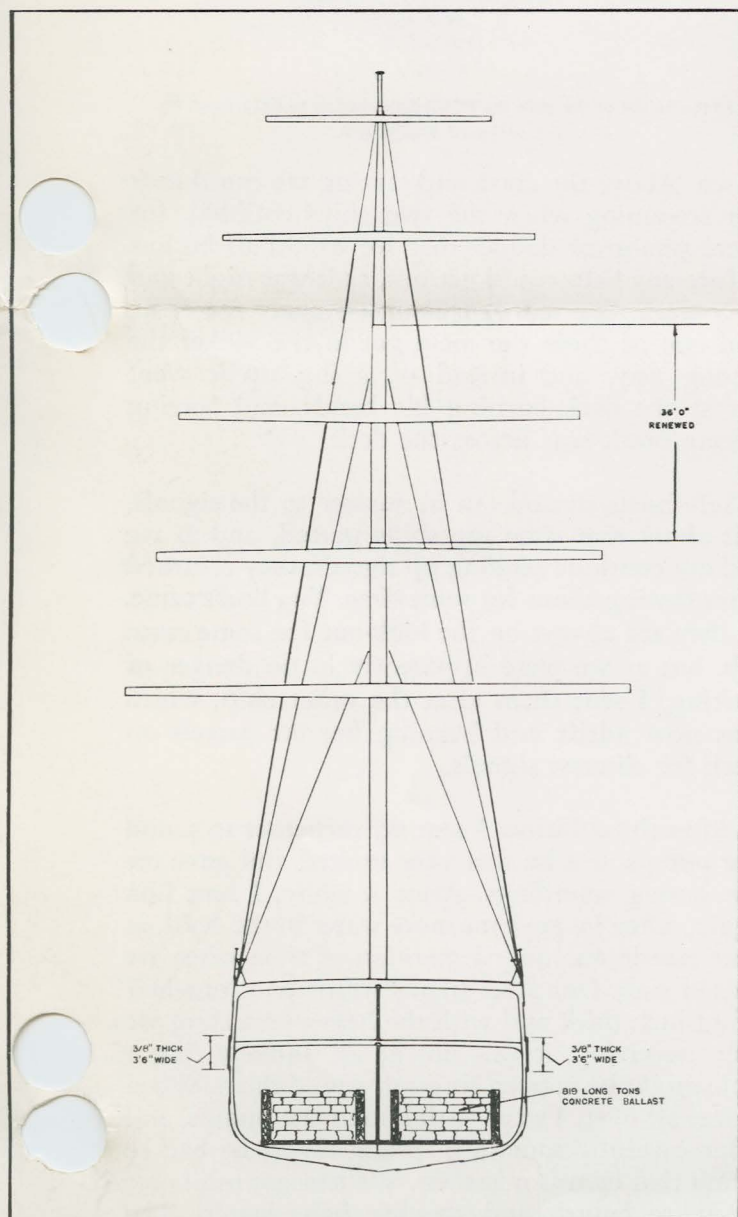
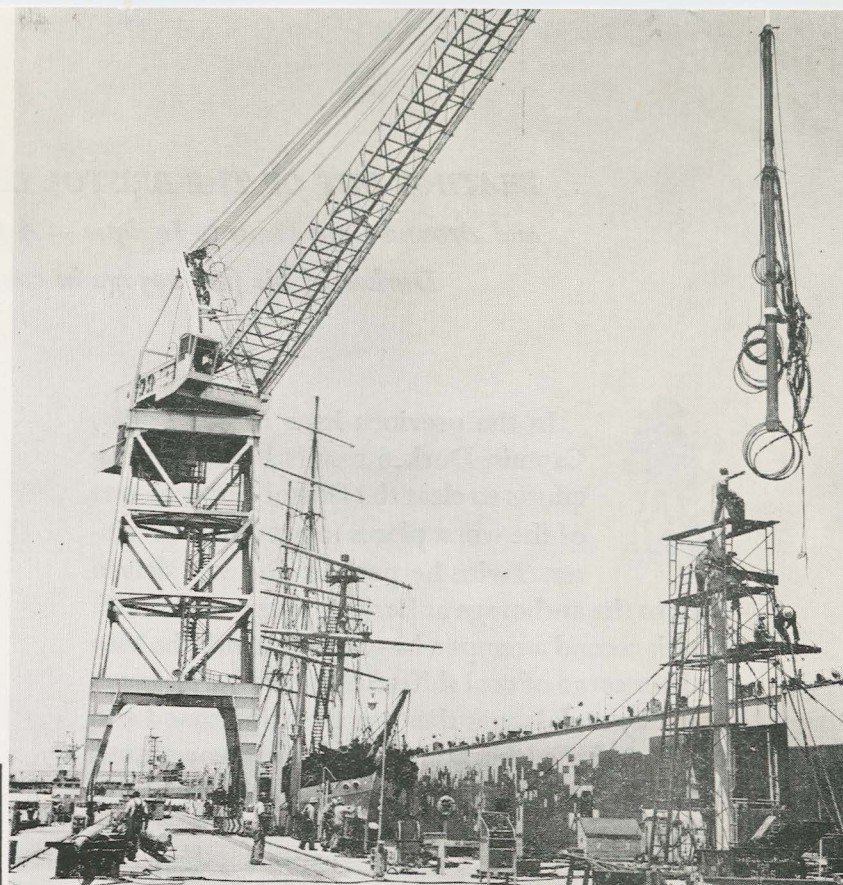
**DOUBLERS STRENGTHEN THIN AND PITTED HULL PLATES . . .** Here a Bethlehem welder doubles a strake of plating near the forefoot. A new shoe has been fitted to the lower stem. The condition of the plating below the waterline was generally found to be excellent, although the waterline itself — "between wind and water" — required about 263 feet of plating total port and starboard.





# JOINING TOPMAST AND TOPGALLANT . . .

The new foretopmast, 36 feet in length, has been temporarily erected on the wharf ahead of the ship and held upright with jury stays. Ernie Ruiz, Rigger Supervisor, guides the wooden topgallant mast into place. When the two sections are joined, both topmast and topgallant mast will be lifted aboard as a unit by the crane and welded in place on the cropped-off foremast.



## THE WORK DONE . . . April 19-June 9, 1960

- One thousand tons of sand ballast removed.
- Hold sandblasted and coated with preservative grease or redlead.
- A half-dozen rusted transverse floors and a short section of keelson replaced.
- Wooden cribbing built for concrete ballast.
- Strake of new plating welded at waterline. (154' port, 109' stbd., short doublers fore & aft.
- Bottom sandblasted, coated with hot plastic.
- Rusted-out foretopmast replaced.
- New foremast rigging installed.



Jack Dant, Museum Association President, discusses work progress with Bethlehem's Elliott Bortfeld. Bethlehem spirit, from management to artisans, was plainly, "We want this old ship to last."



*BEATING OUT OF THE BRISTOL CHANNEL in the Winter of '94,  
and Around Cape Horn to Iquique — A Reminiscence by Capt. Alfred H.  
Durkee of his first voyage in command of BALCLUTHA*



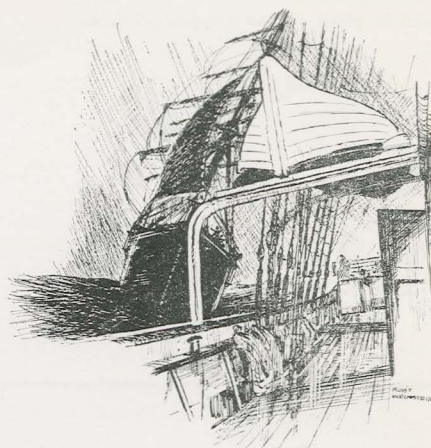
In the previous issue of *Sea Letter*, Captain Durkee recalls his harrowing efforts to clear the Bristol Channel, one of the worst places to get out of in winter. Twice he put out and was driven back to the anchorage at Barry, a port near Cardiff. On his second attempt a huge roller struck the ship and her cargo of coal shifted. However, after much difficulty and danger they got the ship around and ran back for anchorage. Among the many vessels trying to get out was the wooden ship *Polynesia* which, at the height of the gale, parted her anchor and crashed into *Balclutha*. "There we were . . . both ships rolling heavily, their yards catching into each other's, breaking away some of the sails, which began banging in the wind, having carried with them some of the yards and masts. . . . It was a scene and a sound one could never forget as long as he lived."

## Part II

When I was a boy in the old country school-house, we had a sentence in grammar to parse which I have always remembered. It was taken from Washington Irving's story of a voyage he made in a sailing ship from America to England many years ago. I think he was describing the weather before a storm came on, and he said, the whistling of the wind through the rigging sounded like funeral wailing. There is often a peculiar whistle to the wind at sea before a gale, one might call it a moaning or sighing. We always felt sure there was a storm coming when we heard it, but after we got the wind, it would change to a shrill shriek sounding like ten thousand devils.

In this case with two ships close together, the shrieking of the wind was of course greatly magnified. The wooden ship was on our lee side and the captain tried by setting a couple of staysails to get his ship away, for she was suffering the most as she was not as strong as our steel one.

The captain of this wooden ship had recently been married. His wife was a sister of the British consul at Barbadoes, and this was her first voyage



At the height of the gale the POLYNESIA began to drag down on the anchored BALCLUTHA.

at sea. Above the crash and tearing we could hear her screaming when the two ships collided, for there was great danger that we would all be lost before any help could get out, as it was night and very dark. We sent up distress signals for help, and one of these the mate got in the socket the wrong way, and instead of going up it went across the deck burning his hands, and leaving a long black scar across the deck.

Life boats started out in answer to the signals, but about that time the ships parted, and as we did not continue sending up signals, they returned after rowing about for some time. Tug boats came, as they are always on the look-out for some extra job, but as we were apparently in no danger of sinking, I sent them after the other ship, which was now adrift and burning her tar barrels on deck for distress signals.

After the collision, I sent my carpenter to sound the pumps, but he was very excited and gave me the wrong soundings. After a while, I sent him again, when he gave me more water in the hold, at that rate it was only a question of time when we would sink. Our steel plates were about one-half of an inch thick and with the heavy pounding we were receiving, it was not at all unlikely that a hole might be pierced through one of them. When it was all over, I went with him to the pumps, and after carefully sounding several times, he had to admit that he was mistaken. We had got our boats ready to launch and the life belts handy. The



cabin boy was so excited he got a life buoy around his waist—a large round buoy that is thrown overboard in case a man is in the water. Of course he should have put on a life belt, which would not have been much in the way. But the buoy around him took up a lot of room, so that when he came up to get on deck he got stuck in the doorway, and there my wife found him shouting for help. By lowering one side and lifting the other, she got him through easy enough.

### *BALCLUTHA DAMAGED*

When daylight came we found our plates along the water line had been badly indented, so it was considered necessary to go into dry dock and have them removed. We were there two weeks getting repaired. One morning I was going ashore with my wife when, with a little moan, she dropped at my feet. After much difficulty we got her on board the ship and a doctor summoned. We then had to get her ashore in comfortable lodgings, and the best doctors in the two cities to consult. They assured me that it was only a question of time when she would be well again. It was the excitement of the bad weather and the collision that had brought on her illness; so I had to sail away leaving her in Wales.

After all repairs were made we started again, and finally got out to sea, although we had to work out against head gales. We met more head gales long before we reached the Horn this voyage, and when we had Staten Island abeam, trouble began in earnest. It is always a case of continually watching the weather. One often shortens sail, makes it again, and again takes it in during the course of a day. Sometimes making a good leg to the southward the captain dislikes to tack and stand back, so he keeps on and runs so far south that there is danger, if the wind should come around from the southward, that he would get his ship frozen up. One voyage I got down to 60 south, but in that case the wind hauled a little and we reached around without much trouble. This time, however, there was no such luck. We had gale after gale until finally a large portion of the crew was laid up sick, either with fever, or salt water boils. No one who has not been there can imagine the strain on the captain in trying to get around Cape Horn with a succession of heavy gales against him. If he works up too near the land and gets caught on a lee shore he knows there is nothing but a rocky coast for him, and if

in winter, ice and snow. Even if one got on shore it is a serious question how the natives would treat him. This passage in the "Balclutha" was about my hardest time in getting around. It is only a couple of hundred miles, but to do that is the rub. We were this time three weeks doing it. It was a mighty relief when the stern Cape was behind us and bad weather over for a while.

### *A BURIAL OFF CAPE HORN*

Off the Horn, we saw a ship hove to, no doubt burying one of the crew. Cases have been known when two ships have been hove to within sight of each other off the Horn, each burying someone. It is a hard task for the captain, especially when it is a wife or child.

From the Horn up to Iquique we had fine weather and made very good time. But the whole trip was a great disappointment to me. It being my first voyage in a steel ship, I was anxious to make a good passage, whereas with the head gales I was about thirty days too long.

Sailing ships arriving at Iquique anchor in the outer harbor. The captain then goes ashore, enters the ship at customs and from the harbor master secures a berth, after which he engages a tug boat and moves his ship into the inner harbor, there mooring her with two anchors out. Most sailing ships take coal to Iquique, and the only cargo to load is nitrate of soda. The nitrate from the mines is brought in on the railway, although from many of the smaller mines, it is brought in on pack mules, in large bags ready for shipment, weighing about two hundred pounds each.

The coast of Chile for several hundred miles is nothing but sand, with so much nitrate mixed with it that nothing will grow, especially as it never rains on this part of the coast. Whatever shrubs and flowers there are in the city park must be set in large tubs in soil brought in by some of the coasting steamers. This time, while I was in Iquique, I remember someone, probably from one of the ships, put up a sign in the park, "Please keep off the grass." As there was not a blade of grass to be seen, it made the Chilean officials rather hot, and they offered quite a large reward, hoping to find the one who did it. In Iquique, it would take a couple of months to discharge a cargo of coal and load another of nitrate, and we used to be glad enough to sail away and leave such a desolate country.



SAN FRANCISCO

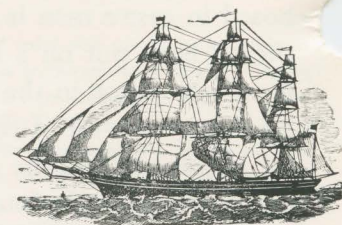
# Maritime Museum

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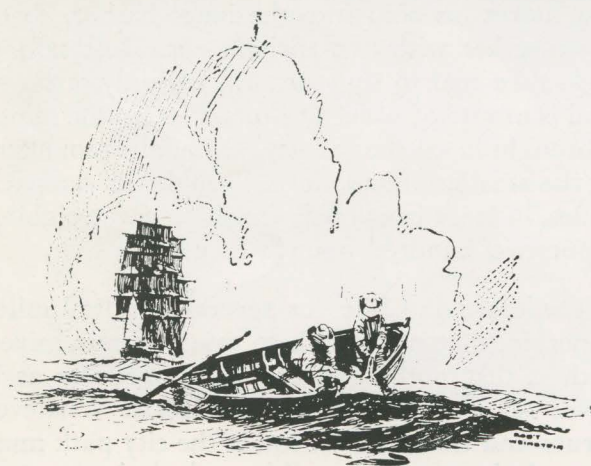


ROGER OLMSTED  
BASIL KNAUTH *Editors*

RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED

## BALCLUTHA IN THE DOLDRUMS, Catching Turtles, A Further *Recollection of Captain Durkee*

Coming home from San Francisco and down near the line in the Pacific Ocean, we caught a couple of dozen turtles. It had been rainy and cloudy for two or three days, and then the sun came out hot, when we found them asleep on the water. As there was a very light wind and the ship going slow, we put out a small boat which



Catching turtles on the line

a man sculled; you could not row it for that would wake them up. Another man would get in the bow and they would gently come up on the turtle. If it was a small one, he would lift it directly into the boat, but if a large one the man would turn it over on its back, then the two of them would get it up over the side. They had to be careful however, for if they took hold of it near the head, they would get bitten.

One sailor, I remember, had just bought a shirt out of the slop chest, and he had the sleeve torn off by the turtle. He came to me and wanted to know if I would give him another one, but I told him it was better to loose his shirt than it was to get bitten. Another man was dared to put his finger in the turtle's mouth after his head was cut off; of course the whole crowd of them were around there, laughing and making sport. This fellow was a German, but he did not want to be dared, so he put his finger in and got caught, for the jaws contracted and bit him badly, so that he came to me to have the wound done up.

The turtle apparently retains life after its head is off, longer than anything known, although they used to say when I was a boy in the country, that a snake would not really die until sunset, even if killed during the morning. We put the turtles in the boats and changed the water twice a day, trying to keep them as long as possible, but they did not live very long. I learned afterward that the whalers came down there among the islands, and caught lots of them, but gave them nothing to eat or drink, and they lived a long while. If we could have taken them to London where we were bound, I would have sold them for several pounds each. However, I kept a lot of the shells, which I gave to the Ship Owner, and no doubt they are still in his very fine house and garden on the river Clyde in Scotland.

Drawings by Robert Weinstein